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ABSTRACT

This annotated bibliography of 12 publications on student self-esteem includes six research studies that indicate the following: (1) it is the actual ability of students, not their self-concepts of ability, that make the difference in academic success; (2) students who feel strong parental pressure generally have lower self-esteem; (3) self-esteem has a negligible effect on subsequent delinquency, and delinquent behavior itself tends to lower, not raise, self-esteem; (4) there is no significant causal relationship between general self-esteem and academic achievement; (5) self-esteem is caused by prior success in the classroom; and (6) high self-esteem is a consequence of having experienced meaningful successes. Additional publications deal with: measuring self-esteem in early adolescents; steps administrators can take to raise students' self-esteem and to help students in middle-level schools enhance their self-perception; ways to block the no-effort strategy employed by students who have a fear of failure; helping students set meaningful goals that they can attain. Finally, one article argues that healthy self-esteem is based on a realistic and responsible assessment of one's self in all its aspects, and accepting the worth and rights of others. (MLF)

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Number 94, September 1988

The Best of ERIC presents annotations of ERIC literature on important topics in educational management.

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management
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Student Self-Esteem

1 **Bachman, Jerald G., and Patrick M. O'Malley.** "Self-Concepts, Self-Esteem, and Educational Experiences: The Frog Pond Revisited (Again)." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50, 1 (January 1986): 35-46.

How are students affected by comparing themselves with their schoolmates? Do they acquire lower opinions of their own abilities when they are surrounded by more able students? And does this in turn make them lower their aspirations and achieve less?

In a large-scale study of white young men in U.S. high schools, Bachman and O'Malley used sophisticated mathematical tools to determine possible causal relationships. They found that having schoolmates with relatively higher abilities does slightly lower one's self-esteem and self-concepts of ability. The effects are quite weak, however, and do not influence educational attainments beyond the high school years.

This indicates that students do not estimate their abilities primarily by comparing themselves with fellow students. In fact, actual ability itself seems to be the primary determinant of self-concepts of ability; it is more important even than grades or social comparisons.

Moreover, this study finds that it is the actual abilities of students, not their self-concepts of ability, that make the difference in academic success. Even having a higher socioeconomic status does not contribute to higher grades unless accompanied by higher ability.

Bachman and O'Malley conclude that if we want students to do better academically, little would be gained by placing everyone in schools with more limited classmates—even if this were possible. "A more promising approach would be to help them to maximize the use of their aptitudes and thus actually increase their abilities. For what it is worth, that would also raise their self-concepts."

2 **Beane, James A.** "Self-Concept and Esteem in the Middle Level School." *NASSP Bulletin* 67, 463 (May 1983): 63-71. EJ 279 576.

Students in middle level schools undergo a dramatic change and reorientation in all areas of development: physical, cognitive, and social. Consequently, their self-concepts and self-esteem are in a constant state of flux, needing continual revision as new abilities and physical characteristics appear. The school must do whatever it can to enhance the self-perceptions of these transescents, so that growth and development through this difficult stage is as positive and constructive as possible.

Hard work is involved in formulating self-views that are clear, positive, and based on worthwhile values. Schools can help students do this in several ways: (1) Physical education programs can focus on fitness, nutrition, and aerobic exercise classes that enable students to feel happier about their physical appearance. (2) Community service projects give students a sense of personal worth and responsible contribution. (3) When students with learning disabilities are required to teach others about a personal hobby or interest, they have an opportunity to gain status by demonstrating a unique skill or talent. (4) Participating in a play about what it is like to be a transescent offers a safe avenue for examining those topics.

Beane also lists several ways that principals can promote the goal of enhancing students' self-concept and self-esteem: Include self-esteem as a curriculum goal, involve parents, avoid discipline that degrades and humiliates, and encourage teachers who are committed to the personal and social development of adolescents.

3 **Conrath, Jerry.** *Our Other Youth: Handbook of Guidelines for Teachers and Other Adults Who Work with at Risk Kids* and *Discouraged or Defeated Learners*. Published by the author, 1986. 49 pages. ED 278 153.

Conrath is a consultant who works with children who feel discouraged and defeated—children who have a deep sense of personal impotency, helplessness, and low self-worth. In locus-of-control studies, these children are termed *externalizers*. They see the world as something happening to them, outside their control and responsibility.

Internalizers, on the other hand, have a high degree of self-esteem. They have confidence in themselves and their abilities, feel in control of their lives, and consequently accept responsibility for their actions. They also accept their own authority and act on the basis of their own values for their own purposes. How can we turn externalizers into internalizers?

Conrath's answer has two parts: First, self-confidence and a sense of control over one's life will come with success in skill development and learning. Nothing justifies a feeling of competence more than actual competence itself. So, help students set meaningful goals that they can attain, and point out the relation-

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ship between their effort and their accomplishments when they succeed.

Second, Conrath maintains that students need to internalize the values that make education desirable. Teachers must help students to see for themselves the purpose, value, utility, and relevance of the things that they are asked to learn and do. Money, trinkets, and grades focus on external and less important reasons for study and may actually retard learning. On the other hand, those who know the simple joys of learning and who can see the value of education for themselves will not need to be coaxed, prodded, or bribed into doing their studies.

4 **Covington, Martin V.** "The Self-Worth Theory of Achievement Motivation: Findings and Implications." *The Elementary School Journal* 85, 1 (September 1984): 5-20. EJ 307 222.

According to self-worth theory, self-esteem in itself does not cause students to achieve anything at all. Rather, it is the desire to get more self-esteem—or to preserve the self-esteem they already have—that motivates students.

In this view, one would expect that students with the lowest self-esteem would be the most driven to achieve and to prove themselves. But Covington notes that a fear of failure can outweigh the desire for success. When this happens, students may adopt a no-effort strategy to protect the little self-esteem that they have. They try to hide their incompetence by refusing to do their work.

Covington's research indicates that this no-effort ploy is less likely in the primary grades. Younger children are more susceptible to the work ethic, to finding their personal worth in effort, not yet realizing that people differ in their ability to succeed through effort. Older students, however, define their worth in terms of natural ability, recognizing that it is the primary determinant of success, no matter what the effort.

Covington suggests several ways to block this no-effort strategy: First, remind students that censure and failure are inevitable when one refuses even to try. Second, point out that self-improvement and pride in a job well done are available to all, regardless of ability. Third, use cooperative learning situations to emphasize the importance of cooperation and helpfulness over competition as a source of personal worth. And, finally, use mastery learning, which allows students the time they need to achieve a given level of competence, thereby reducing the perceived importance of ability.

5 **Eskilson, Arlene, and others.** "Parental Pressure, Self-Esteem, and Adolescent Reported Deviance: Bending the Twig Too Far." *Adolescence* 21, 83 (Fall 1986): 501-15. EJ 345 008.

When junior high and high school students feel pressured by their parents, how does this affect their self-esteem and behavior? This study found that students who feel strong parental pressure generally have lower self-esteem, feel less able to meet family expectations, and are more likely to use alcohol. Surprisingly, however, they are not more likely to get low grades, to use marijuana, or to commit acts of vandalism.

Low self-esteem, by itself, was not significantly related to substance use or to vandalism. In fact, marijuana users actually tended to score higher on self-esteem than nonusers, perhaps because drug use wins peer approval and alleviates a sense of failure. Alcohol use alone did not appear to diminish self-esteem, perhaps because drinking is considered "adult" behavior. Even vandalism, which is not peer condoned, was not significantly correlated with low self-esteem in this study.

Students who use marijuana or alcohol report significant peer pressure to do so. Nevertheless, the authors of this report conclude that parental pressure may be more important than either peer pressure or low self-esteem in leading to alcohol use. Students with low self-esteem are more likely to use alcohol only when they also feel under strong parental pressure to achieve.

6 **Holly, William J.** *Student Self-Esteem and Academic Success.* OSSC Bulletin Series. Eugene: Oregon School Study Council, University of Oregon, October 1987. 37 pages. ED 287 205.

Children with high self-esteem usually do better in school. But is self-esteem the cause of their competence? Not so, says Holly, who reviews research findings that point to just the opposite conclusion: high self-esteem is a consequence of having experienced meaningful successes.

This is not to deny the importance of having self-confidence. When discouraged learners doubt their ability to succeed, they see no sense in trying. But if we want our children to feel self-assured and confident, perhaps we should focus on helping them to acquire competencies that will justify a sense of confidence.

Self-confidence alone, however, provides no motive to achieve. This is because the motive for any behavior lies in its perceived value. Even students who feel competent are not likely to make an outstanding effort if they regard their schoolwork as meaningless and without value. Nor is achievement likely to raise their self-esteem much if they do not recognize the value of the achievement.

On the other hand, students who can see for themselves the value of what they are asked to learn and do will not require the additional motive that success might raise their self-esteem. The perceived value of the work itself will motivate them. Holly concludes that the most reliable route to a healthy sense of self-esteem is for students to forget about self-esteem as a goal in itself and to simply concentrate on being the best that they can be in the pursuit of those things most worth doing.

In his interviews with teachers, Holly found that self-esteem enhancement programs have anticipated many of the doubts raised by their critics. Most teachers emphasize that self-esteem comes from hard work and personal effort. And they stress the importance of having good values, having a realistic self-image, being responsible, and accepting the worth and rights of others.

7 **Juhasz, Anne McCreary.** "Measuring Self-Esteem in Early Adolescents." *Adolescence* 20, 80 (Winter 1985): 877-87. EJ 329 306.

Self-esteem, according to Juhasz, rests on two separate factors: First, people rate themselves with respect to various objective standards. Second, they attach a value or importance to those self-ratings. Consequently, it is possible for a person to have high self-esteem even when he regards himself as deficient in a certain area, simply because he does not feel that the particular deficiency is important.

Since self-esteem depends as much on personal values as on self-ratings, Juhasz believes that it is important to know what the students themselves feel is important. After all, different age groups may differ in their primary concerns. So she has developed a "How I See Myself" survey in which students are asked to list the things about themselves that make them feel good (or bad) about themselves. They then rank those items in importance.

The items most often mentioned by twelve to fourteen year olds were those related to academic self-esteem. Second in importance were personality traits such as maturity, friendliness, and feeling for others. A surprisingly large number of adolescents listed having possessions, pets, and clothes as making them feel good about themselves. Other responses included: "Honest, healthy, rich, different, modest, having sex, high living standard, having a good time, to eat, and a sense of humor."

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Juhasz believes that identifying the components of self-esteem for different age groups will help concerned adults better to understand what really motivates students. It also should facilitate development of self-esteem enhancement programs that pay attention to those factors that are most important to specific age groups.

8 **Lerner, Barbara.** "Self-Esteem and Excellence: The Choice and the Paradox." *American Educator* 9, 4 (Winter 1985): 10-16. EJ 329 035.

Enhancing student self-esteem has been widely regarded as the master key both to happiness and to academic excellence. Consequently, many educators have felt that teachers must give top priority to raising children's self-esteem: They must accept each child just as he or she is, providing constant praise and encouragement whether it is earned or not. Criticism must be avoided at all costs to protect the child's fragile self-esteem.

Lerner argues that this "feel-good now" approach to enhancing self-esteem has not resulted in greater student competence. In the 1960s and 1970s, the competence of American children dropped markedly in all grades except K through 4. Neither has it resulted in greater happiness, says Lerner, who cites increased rates of drug use, out-of-wedlock births, and suicide. In fact, she says, narcissism and grandiosity have replaced neuroticism as the primary concern of clinical therapists. To avoid creating a generation of self-centered, unrealistic, incompetent students, Lerner advocates a return to the views of Sigmund Freud and Alfred Binet.

Freud believed that adults must accept the reality principle in order to gain happiness. The infantile desire for immediate gratification must be replaced by a realization that hard work and sacrifice sometimes are required for a greater future happiness. The willingness and ability to delay immediate gratification is a sign of emotional maturity.

Binet held that children are egoists by nature. To develop intellectually, they must be taught self-criticism, not self-esteem. They need to be taught to monitor their own work, to critically appraise it, and to constantly look for ways to improve it. Lerner is not against self-esteem as such. But it needs to be earned—to be firmly grounded in actual competencies and accomplishments. Healthy self-esteem is based on a realistic and responsible assessment of one's self in all its aspects, and on recognizing what is needed to actually succeed in life.

9 **McCarthy, John D., and Dean R. Hoge.** "The Dynamics of Self-Esteem and Delinquency." *American Journal of Sociology* 90, 2 (September 1984): 396-410. EJ 310 627.

Howard Kaplan has theorized that low self-esteem leads adolescents to engage in delinquent behavior that in turn raises their self-esteem. McCarthy and Hoge, however, question both parts of this theory. They find that self-esteem has a negligible effect on subsequent delinquency. And delinquent behavior itself tends to lower, not raise, self-esteem.

McCarthy and Hoge administered questionnaires over a period of time to 1,965 students in grades 7, 9, and 11. Then a series of path-analyses (using LISREL and regression techniques) were employed to determine possible causal relations between self-esteem and delinquency. The relation between the two is the reverse of that postulated by Kaplan.

First, increases in self-esteem never were followed by significant reductions in delinquency. This was especially true of the low self-esteem group.

Second, when delinquent behavior does affect self-esteem, it tends to lower it, not raise it. The more frequent or more serious the acts of delinquency, the lower the self-esteem becomes. This is especially true of students initially high in self-esteem.

McCarthy and Hoge conclude that perhaps researchers should look elsewhere than self-esteem to understand delinquency. Delinquency appears to affect self-esteem more than self-esteem affects delinquency. Even so, delinquency does not seem to affect self-esteem very much, perhaps because a certain amount of delinquency is considered normal in our society. When it does affect self-esteem, it tends to lower it, perhaps because breaking accepted rules results in condemnation from significant others.

10 **Pottebaum, Sheila M.; Timothy Z. Keith; and Stewart W. Ehly.** "Is There a Causal Relation between Self-Concept and Academic Achievement?" *Journal of Educational Research* 79, 3 (January/February 1986): 140-44. EJ 330 645.

Does self-esteem contribute importantly to academic success? Although much research in the past thirty years has been devoted to self-esteem and academic achievement, the causal relation between the two remains to be clearly defined. Recent studies have found little positive correlation between the two. And studies that are designed to capture causality often suggest either that the two concepts are not causally related or that the relation is the reverse of what many educators have supposed: If anything,

achievement causes the higher self-esteem that is correlated with academic success.

In an attempt to find a causal relation between self-esteem and academic achievement, Pottebaum, Keith, and Ehly used a cross-lagged panel correlation on data collected from 58,728 high school sophomores and seniors. Self-esteem was measured by a four-item instrument that measures general, rather than academic, self-concept: "I take a positive attitude toward myself"; "I am able to do things as well as most other people"; "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself"; and "I feel I am a person of worth, on an equal plane with others."

The results of this analysis, consistent with much of the best research in this area, suggest that there is no significant causal relationship between general self-esteem and achievement. These researchers conclude that perhaps educators should not focus on self-esteem as a way to raise academic performance. Perhaps they should be dealt with as two separate and unrelated constructs.

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11 **Sarokon, Stephen C.** "Student Self-Esteem: A Goal Administrators Can Help to Achieve." NASSP Bulletin 70, 487 (February 1986): 1-5. EJ 333 022.

What steps can a principal take to improve student self-esteem? To answer this, Sarokon interviewed staff and students at four Pennsylvania senior high schools, selected on the basis of dramatic gains or losses in their self-esteem scores. (Sarokon does not say whether these changes in self-esteem were followed by the expected changes in academic achievement scores.)

Factors that were perceived as improving self-esteem were (1) establishing student self-esteem as a school priority; (2) improving communications within the school—holding group meetings involving students, teachers, and administrators and implementing their suggestions; (3) using a uniform award system and community booster clubs to recognize the accomplishments of all students; (4) having consistently successful athletic teams and positive player-coach relationships.

Factors that were perceived as diminishing self-esteem were: (1) self-esteem not established as a priority; (2) consistently poor performance by athletic teams; (3) increased student use of drugs and alcohol; (4) teachers labeling their classes as the worst in years; (5) lack of teacher interest in extracurricular student activities; and (6) difficult transition from student-oriented middle schools to subject-matter-oriented high schools.

Sarokon suggests that administers can raise student self-esteem by (1) making self-esteem a school priority; (2) conducting faculty meetings to identify factors that increase or diminish student self-esteem; (3) training teachers to deal with students in positive ways; (4) increasing student participation in athletics, band, and musical productions; and (5) using all available resources to recognize student accomplishments (bulletin boards, displays, assemblies, newspapers, announcements, and so forth).

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12 **Scheirer, Mary Ann, and Robert E. Kraut.** "Increasing Educational Achievement via Self-Concept Change." *Review of Educational Research* 49, 1 (Winter 1979): 131-50. EJ 205 655.

Numerous programs have been founded on the belief that raising student self-esteem will increase academic achievement. Has the importance of self-esteem been confirmed by these experiences? To determine this, Scheirer and Kraut reviewed studies of these programs, selecting only those that conform to standard criteria for experimental design. The results are not encouraging.

Several of the reviewed programs did succeed in raising either self-esteem or achievement levels, but seldom were both raised in the same program. In the few cases where both were raised, it seemed clear that achievement preceded and caused the increase in self-esteem.

One massive research effort studied the open school approach that stresses self-esteem as a prerequisite to learning. It found that traditional "basic skills" programs are more effective both in raising self-esteem and in raising achievement levels.

Another program was designed to reduce delinquency by raising self-esteem. After fifteen years, this program had not affected levels of self-esteem, delinquency, or academic performance. Despite the objectively measured failure of this program, however, the instructors and students alike were very enthusiastic and thought the program was working.

Scheirer and Kraut conclude that the evidence that self-esteem causes achievement is overwhelmingly negative. It appears more likely that self-esteem itself is caused by prior success in the classroom. This finding, they say, should make educators more cautious about the perceived importance of self-esteem and its supposed relationship to academic achievement.

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